

A SHADOW IN THE THRONE ROOM

Black

The Silent Inquisitor

Kael Varn stepped into the throne room, his boots clicking on the marble floor. The cold air clung to him like a damp shroud, heavy with the scent of stone and wood polish. He had been summoned by Queen Everia herself, and he had no choice but to attend.

The queen sat on her throne, her piercing green eyes fixed on Kael as he approached. Her dark hair cascaded down her back like a waterfall of night, and for a moment, Kael forgot the gravity of his mission. He was here to investigate rumors of corruption within the Order - not to admire the monarch.

"Kael Varn," she said, her voice like the gentle lapping of waves on a summer shore. "I've heard you're quite skilled at... cleaning up messes."

Her words dripped with an unsettling sweetness, and Kael knew better than to take them at face value. He inclined his head in respect, acknowledging her title and his purpose.

"I'm here to do what needs doing, Your Majesty," he said, choosing each word with care.

Everia gestured to a nearby chair, its intricately carved wooden armrests gleaming in the soft light of the throne room. "Please, sit. We'll discuss the particulars."

Kael settled into the chair, his eyes scanning the space for any sign of the Curators or Knights who usually accompanied the queen. But they were nowhere to be seen.

As he waited, Everia leaned forward, her elbows on her knees. Her eyes sparkled with an inner light that made Kael uneasy. "You see, Kael, I've received a complaint from one of our own - a member of the Order has been acting erratically, causing trouble in the streets. They say he's been using... excessive force."

Kael raised an eyebrow, intrigued despite himself. "Which knight?"

Everia's lips curled into a sly smile. "You know as well as I do that I shouldn't name names without proof. But let's just say it's someone close to you, someone with whom you have history."

A shiver ran down Kael's spine as he leaned back in his chair. This was not what he had expected – or wanted. The queen's game was always one of subtlety, but this... this was something else entirely.

"What do you want me to do about it?" he asked warily.

Everia leaned back, steepling her fingers together. "I want you to find out who it is and put a stop to their actions. Discreetly, of course."

Kael stood up, a surge of determination rising in him. He knew the risks – the Order's reputation for justice without spectacle was one thing, but its morality was another altogether. But he also knew that if someone within his ranks was acting out of line, it would have to be stopped.

As he turned to leave, the queen's voice called after him, low and smooth as a snake's hiss. "Remember, Kael – the weight of balance is not always easy to bear."

He nodded once, already moving towards the door. Outside, in the cold darkness of the corridors, he could feel the threads of the Order beginning to fray. The shadows on his skin seemed to deepen, warning him that this was only the beginning.

As he stepped out into the Ashen Roads, the chill of the night air hit him like a slap in the face. He knew what lay ahead – the whispered secrets, the hidden histories, and the subtle games played by those who thought they were above the law. Kael Varn, silent inquisitor, was about to find out just how deeply corruption had seeped into the heart of House Veylan.

With a quiet curse, he set off into the night, ready to navigate the treacherous paths that lay ahead, one whispered secret at a time.

He moved swiftly through the streets, weaving between stalls and vendors, his eyes scanning for any sign of life. The streets were always darker in the Era of Expansion – people huddled indoors as much as possible, whispering warnings of strange occurrences and unexplained omens.

Eventually, Kael arrived at the tavern he sought, a cramped dive that catered to those who didn't mind getting their hands dirty. It was here that he found his contact – a hooded figure sipping ale in the corner.

The figure stood as Kael approached, pushing back its hood to reveal a young woman with an angular face and piercing blue eyes. Her name was Lysandra, an apprentice among the Order's Curators. She leaned against the bar, her hand on the worn wood, and spoke in a voice barely above a whisper.

"Kael, I've got something for you – one of our own has indeed been using excessive force. His name is Malakai. He was once part of the Nightforged unit – you know him?"

Malakai. The name cut through Kael like a knife, bringing memories he'd rather forget back to life.

"What's the situation with him?" Kael asked, his eyes never leaving Lysandra's face.

She hesitated, her hand twisting into a knot around the bar's edge. "Malakai's been taking... 'corrective measures', I suppose you'd call them. Not all of them approved by the Order - or even in line with our oaths."

Kael's grip on his cup tightened as he digested this. "And you're certain it's him?"

Lysandra's voice was laced with a deep unease. "I've seen it myself, Kael - the way he works, the things he does... it's not Order business. He's getting close to something big, and I think we're running out of time."

Kael knew that tone - Lysandra was scared for more than just herself. This went far beyond a rogue knight; it threatened the very balance the Order swore to uphold.

He set his cup down, the silence in the tavern growing thicker than the air around them. "Tell me what I need to know," he said softly, his eyes locked on hers.

As she began her tale, Kael felt the threads of fate begin to tangle themselves around him - a silent, whispered dance that would lead him deep into the heart of darkness, and force him to face the shadows within himself.

Kael's ears were attuned to the low murmur of conversation, but his eyes never left Lysandra's face as she spoke of Malakai's transgressions. He listened with a growing sense of unease, the memories he'd rather forget rising like dark ghosts from their resting place.

"...and then there was the warehouse on Crows' Spire," Lysandra said, her voice barely above a whisper. "I overheard him discussing something with one of the city guards. They're smuggling... goods, of some kind. But not just any goods - they're marked with the symbol of the Broken Writ." Her eyes darted around the tavern, as if searching for eavesdroppers.

Kael's grip on his cup tightened until the ceramic creaked under his fingers. The Broken Writ was a cursed thing - an arcane sigil said to mark everything that fell beyond the Order's control. He knew that Malakai, once one of the most promising knights in the Nightforged unit, had always walked the thin line between duty and ambition.

"Keep going," Kael said, his voice a low growl, as if trying to keep the beast at bay.

Lysandra took a deep breath before continuing. "I've seen him meeting with the city's... less reputable elements - the Red Vipers, the Iron Hand. They're using him, Kael. He's become a pawn in their game."

Kael's mind spun, weaving the threads of information into a tapestry of deceit and corruption. Malakai, once a comrade-in-arms, had succumbed to the very darkness he was sworn to vanquish.

"We need to get him out," Kael said, his voice decisive. "I'll take care of it tonight."

Lysandra's hand closed around his arm, her fingers digging into his muscle like talons. "You can't go alone," she said, her eyes locked on his. "Malakai will have guards, and they won't hesitate to kill anyone who gets in their way."

Kael's gaze lingered on hers for a moment before he shook off her grip. "I'll manage," he said, standing up from the stool.

Lysandra followed him out of the tavern, into the chilled night air that seemed to cling to his skin like a damp shroud. They walked in silence, their footsteps echoing off the stone buildings as they navigated the narrow alleys between the city's crowded districts. Kael knew he was walking a thin line - one misstep could unravel everything he'd worked for.

As they turned onto a deserted street, Lysandra leaned against the wall, her voice low and urgent. "Kael, listen... I think there's more to this than just Malakai. Everia knows something we don't - something she's hiding from the rest of us."

Kael's heart skipped a beat as he turned towards her, his mind racing with implications. The queen's words echoed in his memory - "the weight of balance is not always easy to bear". He knew what that meant: that Everia was walking a tightrope between power and corruption, and Kael had stumbled into the middle of it.

His eyes narrowed as he scanned the rooftops, the wind rustling through his hair like a warning. In this game of shadows and lies, where allegiances shifted like sand in the hourglass, Kael knew he couldn't trust anyone - not even himself.

As they walked, Lysandra's words hung in the air like a challenge, making Kael question everything he thought he knew about the queen and her motives. He had always believed Everia to be a just ruler, but now he wondered if that was just a cleverly crafted illusion. He quickened his pace, his mind racing with possibilities.

The night air seemed to thicken around them, heavy with secrets and hidden dangers. Kael's hand instinctively went to the dagger at his belt, a habit born of years of walking the fine line between loyalty and duty. He glanced over at Lysandra, her face illuminated by the faint glow of a nearby lantern. Her eyes seemed darker than usual, as if shadows had seeped into them like ink into water.

They turned onto a narrower street, the buildings seeming to close in around them. Kael's ears picked up the sound of footsteps echoing off the walls - light, almost hesitant. Lysandra tensed beside him, her hand on his arm tightening like a vice. "Do

you hear that?" she whispered.

Kael nodded, his gaze scanning the rooftops for any sign of movement. The city was a latticework of shadows and darkness, but he'd grown accustomed to its rhythms. He could sense when someone was watching – or hiding. His hand on his dagger handle tightened as they turned a corner, the sound of footsteps growing louder.

A figure emerged from the darkness, hood up, face obscured. Kael's instincts screamed at him to draw steel, but something about the way the figure moved told him this wasn't an ambush. The person halted a few paces ahead, their eyes fixed on Lysandra. For a moment, they just stood there, frozen in a tableau of fear and uncertainty.

"Ahmed," Lysandra breathed, her voice barely audible over the pounding of Kael's heart. "What are you doing here?"

Ahmed's hood slipped back, revealing a face lined with worry and fatigue. "I've been watching," he said, his voice low and urgent. "Everia's advisors are meeting in secret – I couldn't get close enough to hear what they're discussing, but it's something big."

Kael's grip on his dagger relaxed slightly as Ahmed's words shed a new light on Lysandra's suspicions. The Nightwalker stood tall, his eyes darting between the two of them before returning to Kael. "I know you've been poking your nose into Malakai's business, but I think it's time we shared what we know." He glanced around the deserted street, as if checking for hidden listeners.

Lysandra stepped forward, her voice firm. "We need to tell the Order – or Everia herself. This goes far beyond one rogue knight."

Ahmed shook his head, his expression grim. "You don't understand what's at stake here. The Order would never act in time – and even if they did, it wouldn't matter. The Red Vipers have... connections, shall we say. People who can make things disappear, or turn a blind eye to certain 'accidents'."

Kael's mind worked overtime, piecing together the fragments of information. Malakai, Everia's advisors, and the Red Vipers – it was more than just a web of corruption; it was an intricate dance, with lives as pawns and power as the prize.

"We need a plan," Lysandra said, her eyes locked on Ahmed's face. "We can't take down Malakai alone – not without exposing ourselves to the Order."

Kael nodded, his mind racing ahead of the conversation. He knew a way into the Red Vipers' stronghold; it was an abandoned warehouse on the outskirts of the city, rumored to be their hub of operations. But getting there undetected would require finesse – and a willingness to walk the thin line between loyalty and deception.

"We'll need inside help," Kael said, his gaze flicking towards Ahmed. "Do you have any connections with the Vipers?"

Ahmed hesitated, his eyes darting between them before settling on Lysandra's face. "I... might know someone," he said slowly. "Someone who owes me a favor – but I'm not sure if it'll be enough."

The silence that followed Ahmed's admission hung heavy as Kael's eyes narrowed, weighing the risks and possibilities. He'd known Ahmed for years, their paths crossing in the darker corners of the city where loyalty was a luxury few could afford. If anyone had connections with the Red Vipers, it would be Ahmed – but he knew better than to trust anyone, least of all the Nightwalker.

Lysandra's voice broke the stillness, her words laced with a hint of warning. "We can't take anyone into our confidence who doesn't need to know." Her eyes flicked towards Ahmed, then back to Kael, as if searching for confirmation that he wouldn't argue against her caution.

Kael nodded, his mind working through the web of allegiances and rivalries in the city's underworld. If they involved someone from the Nightwalkers' inner circle, it could be a double-edged sword – either they'd gain valuable allies or become liabilities themselves. He glanced at Ahmed, who seemed to sense his unspoken question.

"The person I have in mind... her name is Lyra," Ahmed began, his voice measured. "She's been watching the Vipers for months, feeding me information whenever she can." Kael's interest piqued, he leaned forward, his elbows on his knees as Ahmed continued, "But she's not just any informant – she's a former viper herself, turned when they discovered her true loyalties. I owe her a debt, and if anyone can get us inside the Red Vipers' stronghold... it's her."

Lysandra's gaze locked onto Ahmed, her eyes narrowed as she processed the information. "Why did you wait so long to tell us about this?" The question hung in the air, heavy with suspicion, as Ahmed shifted his weight, avoiding direct eye contact.

The sound of footsteps echoed down the alleyway behind them, faint but growing louder, and Kael's instincts screamed at him to move – now. He rose from his crouch, his hand instinctively going to his dagger, but it was not a group of guards; two figures emerged from the darkness, Lyra and a young man with an air of furtive energy, his eyes darting around as if checking for unwanted witnesses.

Lyra's gaze swept over them, her face set in a determined line as she stepped forward. "Ahmed told me to come here," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. Kael's eyes narrowed; the tension between Lyra and Ahmed was palpable – a web of unspoken words and owed debts that could easily entangle their fragile plan.

The pair approached cautiously, flanked by the city's darkness, as if sensing they were trapped in a delicate dance of trust and deception.

Lyra's eyes flicked to Lysandra, then back to Kael, her gaze lingering on his face before she nodded curtly. "We can get you into the Red Vipers' stronghold," she said, her voice low and even. "But it won't be easy - they're tightening their security, anticipating a move from within." Ahmed stepped forward, his eyes locked on Lyra's as if seeking reassurance.

Lysandra's hand was still on Kael's arm, a gentle pressure that seemed to anchor him in the midst of this shifting web. "What makes you think we can trust her?" she asked Ahmed, her voice tight with suspicion. Ahmed's face went slack, his expression a mask of weariness as he answered, "I've seen what I've seen - and Lyra's proven herself time and again." He paused, his eyes darting towards Kael before returning to Lysandra. "Besides, if you don't trust me now, who else do you have?"

The alleyway seemed to grow darker, the shadows deepening as if reflecting the tension between them. Kael's grip on his dagger tightened, a habitual reaction to the uncertainty building in his chest. He glanced at Lyra, her eyes locked on his face, and wondered what unspoken words hung between her and Ahmed. The young man beside her - a fleeting thought caught in Kael's mind: what was his role in this fragile dance of allegiance?

Lysandra's eyes narrowed, her hand on Kael's arm tightening as she searched for a thread of truth in Ahmed's words. The silence stretched out, heavy with unspoken questions and doubts, until Lyra stepped forward, her voice breaking the stillness.

"I'll answer your questions, Nightwalker," she said, her gaze locked on Lysandra's face. "I've worked for Ahmed for months, feeding him information about the Red Vipers' plans. But there's more - I have a source within their ranks, someone who's willing to help us get inside."

Kael's eyes snapped back to Lyra, his mind racing with the implications. A source within the Red Vipers? It was a risk worth taking, but he needed to know more. "Who is it?" he asked, his voice low and even.

Lyra hesitated, her eyes flicking towards Ahmed before returning to Kael's face. "Someone close to Malakai himself," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. "I've been... persuaded by certain promises to help us." The word hung in the air, pregnant with meaning, and Kael's grip on his dagger tightened as he wondered what kind of persuasion had been used.

The young man beside Lyra shifted uncomfortably, his eyes darting between them as if sensing the tension. Ahmed's expression remained neutral, but Kael caught a flicker of something in his eyes - a glimmer of concern, or perhaps even fear.

"We need to know more about your source," Lysandra said, her voice firm. "What makes you think they'll be willing to help us?"

Lyra's face set in a determined line as she answered, "Because I've made it clear that if they don't, I'll expose everything – every secret, every hidden deal, every life they've ruined."

The alleyway seemed to grow colder, the shadows deepening as Kael weighed the risks and possibilities. He glanced at Ahmed, who stood quiet, his eyes fixed on Lyra's face. There was a tension between them, a web of unspoken words and owed debts that could easily unravel their fragile plan.

"We need to move," Lyra said, her voice low and urgent. "The Red Vipers are getting restless – they'll tighten their security within the day."

Lysandra nodded, her eyes locked on Kael's face. "We have a decision to make," she said, her voice tight with doubt. "Do we trust Ahmed, and by extension, Lyra? Or do we walk away, and risk losing our chance to stop Malakai?"

Kael's grip on his dagger relaxed as he searched the faces around him – Ahmed, Lysandra, Lyra, and the young man beside her. He knew that every choice they made would have consequences, some of which could be deadly. The decision weighed heavy in his mind as he looked at Lysandra, her eyes searching for his.

"We don't have a choice," he said finally, his voice low and even. "We need to take the risk. We'll move tonight, under the cover of darkness."

Lysandra's hand on his arm tightened as she nodded, her eyes locked on Lyra. "You'll come with us?" she asked, her voice firm.

Lyra nodded, her face set in a determined line. "I'll get you inside the stronghold. But we need to move now – before they realize what's happening."

Tags: The Broken Writ, Power and Corruption, Silent Watcher